

## **Chapter 3**

### **Gangs in the UK?**

#### **Introduction**

During the past 10 years in particular there has been a marked increase in academic interest about youth gangs (cf. Hallsworth & Young, 2008; Pitts, 2008; Batchelor, 2009; Deuchar, 2009; Goldson, 2011; Densley, 2013; Hallsworth, 2013; Harding 2014) and urban violence in the UK. Whilst there has been a discernible increase in youth gang scholarship recently, it still represents a relatively small area of academic interest as post-War UK youth researchers, rather than looking for gangs, have mostly been concerned with studying subcultures. The early incarnations of British youth subcultural studies were concerned with deviance and 'abnormality rather than normality' (Blackman, 2014:498). Spanning the inter and post-War periods, British subcultural theory was initially influenced by biology and the eugenics movement. Utilizing medical concepts deviant youth group members were described as being mentally subnormal and exhibiting pathological personality traits (see for example Burt, 1925).

UK studies examining youth deviance and delinquency after 1945, whilst retaining elements of the earlier positivist traditions, were dominated by the therapeutic approaches of psychology and psychoanalysis. Bowlby's (1946;1953) theories concerning the "affectionless personality" and "inadequate socialization" caused by maternal-child separation, which he argued was ultimately responsible for juvenile delinquency, served as a model for further research into the causes of deviancy. This 'psychoanalytical approach became the norm' throughout the 1950s and early 1960s (cf. Mays, 1954; Morris, 1957; Trasler, 1962), with major empirical studies defining delinquent youth as 'suffering from psychological problems within a deprived culture' (Blackman, 2014:499). Moreover, the existence of working class youth subcultures was clear evidence as to the young deviant's 'inability to integrate in society' (Ibid). However, by the late

1960s this psychoanalytical understanding of subculture fell out of favour with British scholars who at this point had become heavily influenced by the new deviancy theory emanating from American sociology, particularly the labelling perspective. This new interactionist approach stressed the concept of relativism with regard to wrongdoing by asserting that an action is only deviant because a dominant social group of rule makers has labelled it as such.

Howard Becker, one of the most influential exponents of this new deviancy theory asserted that researchers should sympathise with the outsider, rather than with the rule makers and law enforcers. The way in which societies and social groups arrive at decisions that determine rules and therefore rule breaking, is largely decided through political conflict. This being the case it is therefore true that 'the questions of what rules are to be enforced, what behaviour regarded as deviant, and which people labelled as outsiders must also be regarded as political'. As such, the 'functional view of deviance by ignoring the political aspect of this phenomenon limits our understanding' (Becker, 1963: 7). By the 1970s and in tandem with New Left and counter cultural influences, the labelling perspectives of the new deviancy theory had transformed the way in which UK scholars viewed subcultures. The styles and class-based identities adopted by young people were no longer interpreted as deviant or delinquent and instead were analysed in relation to the dominant and parent culture and social change.

### **Youth Subcultural Studies**

As discussed above, the emergent scholarly interest in youth gangs is particularly noteworthy because it was only thirty years ago or so, that the consensus amongst British social scientists, was that America had youth street gangs whilst the UK had 'youth subcultures' (Campbell et al., 1982). Whilst British social scientists, notably sociologists and the burgeoning area of criminology, were heavily influenced by their American peers as illustrated by the plethora of research focus on youth delinquency and subcultures. There was one particular

area of adolescent deviance favoured by U.S. scholars — the study of delinquent youth street gangs — that was difficult to locate in the UK.

Although the definition and location of the youth street gang both in the US and UK has been/is contested and exceptionally problematic (see chapter 1), this has not stopped the term being ‘used very loosely more or less simply to describe an “unruly” group of’ young people who hang about together. However, the abuse of the term gang in this manner is unacceptable and ‘in order to achieve conceptual integrity’ any criminological or sociological definition ‘must do better than this’ (Tierney, 2006:115). Of great significance in this regard is Frederic Thrasher’s 1927 study *The Gang* which provided a sociological, and the original, definition of the gang which interestingly does not make any direct reference to delinquency:

The gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory (Thrasher, 1963:46).

For most of the post-War period academics in the UK found it difficult to locate gangs — featuring characteristics such as a stable membership, rigid internal structure, cohesiveness and a unity of purpose — and so focused their research energies on youth subcultures.

Although the immediate decades after the Second World War were dominated by discussions about working class young people’s affluence and consumerism, Britain was still a long way

from being a classless society. The UK has long been a country defined by its rigid social class structure which has, for many generations of young people, been transmitted through and distinguished by education, language, occupation, leisure activities, culture and family life. By the end of the 1960s, and taking place in parallel to developments already underway in the UK academy concerning the growing influence of labelling theory, a small number of studies had by then been undertaken that focused on working class youth and structural inequality reproduced through schooling (Jackson and Marsden, 1962; Douglas, 1964; Hargreaves, 1967). During this period there was also a small number of community based youth studies like Willmott's (1966) '*Adolescent Boys of East London*', and in particular Downes' (1966) '*The Delinquent Solution*' which maintained that delinquency provided working class male youth with subcultural solutions to social inequality and restricted life chances. However, it was Phil Cohen's influential '*Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community*' which best illustrates the future direction of youth subcultural studies in Britain during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Cohen's (1972:30) paper took issue with criminologists who associated delinquency with subculture arguing that 'a distinction must be made between delinquency and subculture'. Additionally, Cohen asserted that he did not think the middle class produce subcultures because only dominated cultures can form subcultures, consequently he was particularly interested in exploring the impact subcultures had on the changing patterns of delinquency in working class communities. The slum clearances of the East End and associated development of large estates and new satellite towns on the edges of East London in the 1950s, brought about great changes to working class communities and in particular had destroyed "matrilocal" extended family and kinship networks. According to Cohen this period of great change was accompanied by a phenomenal rise in youth delinquency, particularly property offences such as vandalism, car thefts, and all types of hooliganism. Cohen (1972:31) interprets this rise in delinquency as the unconscious protest by working class youth 'against the general dehumanization of the environment', a direct consequence of the 'loss of the informal social

controls generated by the old neighbourhoods'. Lacking the requisite communication tools to effectively make sense of the changing structural dynamics and contradictions – of extended family, nuclear family, peer group, hegemonic school culture, incohesive working class parent culture, and exploitative labour relations – of the many 'social configurations that he is locked into....what can a poor boy do? Delinquency is one way he can communicate.....through non-verbal channels' (Cohen, 1972:31).

During the 1970s, Cohen's theories on working class subculture went on to be further and systematically developed through the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Although it was established in 1964 the CCCS' work came to prominence in the following decade under the stewardship of Stuart Hall, who served as the Centre's second Director. Most significantly, the ambitious and interdisciplinary scope of the centre's analyses redefined academic understanding of subcultural studies, deviance and young people (Blackman, 2014). For researchers at the CCCS – as illustrated in the landmark edited collection *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 2006) first published in 1975, and Dick Hebdige's (1979) '*Subculture: the meaning of style*' – the objective of Cultural Studies was to analyse and understand the:

....the relationships between those 'relatively autonomous' but never mutually exclusive sets of relations designated as 'culture' and 'society'.....Unlike more conventional sociological inquiries, however, *RTR* gave as much weight to the symbolic as it did to the social – 'subcultures *and* style'.....and with theorising the complex linkages or mediations between them. Throughout, the subcultures project was shadowed by these larger conceptual questions.....among them, Gramsci's 'hegemony', Althusser's 'relative autonomy' and 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence', Barthes' and Levi-Strauss' '*bricolage*' (Hall and Jefferson, 2006: ix)

A further difference in the CCCS approach to subcultures – which differed significantly from the dominant sociological interpretation of ‘society’ and the dominant literary and humanities understanding of culture – was its analysts’ concern and pre occupation with examining the relationship between culture and power. In particular, researchers at the Centre placed great emphasis on subcultural style and ‘the ability to transform cultural objects or to borrow from other places and other times’ in a cut and mix format. The work of the CCCS also preferred the utilisation of ‘ritualistic and symbolic modes of resistance’ and the ‘ambivalent structural relations’ between a subculture and its working class parent culture and the ‘less class bound realm of mass culture’ (Gelder, 1997:145).

One of the key criticisms of the Birmingham approach concerned its overly narrow interpretation of subculture which its researchers examined solely in relation to youth and social class. Additionally, the CCCS has been criticised for its preoccupation with the ‘spectacular’ styles and subcultures of white working class heterosexual males (McRobbie, 1978; Bose, 2003; Carrington and Wilson, 2004; Griffin, 2011) at the expense of studies examining the everyday and mundane activities/styles of youth; including girls and young people from BAME backgrounds. The CCCS approach to the study of youth subcultures had by the 1990s – as a result of neoliberalism and the collapse of the UK youth labour market combined with the growing influence of postmodernist theory – fallen out of favour with British scholars. As such contemporary youth studies research is dominated by either the ‘cultural’ perspective with discussions of individualization, neotribes, fashion, lifestyles and ‘cultural representations in youth’; or by the ‘transitional’ perspective focussing on patterns of economic socialization, linkages between education and work’ (Furlong, 2013:145-6).

### **Youth Gangs in Post-War Britain**

As noted above, throughout most of the post War period the UK youth question had largely been dominated by theoretical and empirical analyses of delinquency and working class subcultural formations. According to this wealth of youth research literature, there was virtually no evidence that pointed to the existence of structured gangs and for Downes (1966) this was a fair indication of their absence from British soil. The only systematic academic enquiry into delinquent gangs in the UK during this period, was undertaken by the psychologist Peter Scott in his 1956 study *'Gangs and Delinquent Groups in London'*. He interviewed 151 boys aged 8-17 on remand for offences carried out in the company of other juveniles, and for comparative research purposes, interviewed a similar cohort of boys who were on remand for offences carried out solitarily. In his empirical study, Scott argued that there were three distinct types of offending group formation – adolescent street groups, loosely structured groups or collectives and structured gangs. The Adolescent street groups did not actually engage in criminal activity, although the majority of casual observers perceived that they did. However, in reality whilst members of this type of group looked fearsome and sometimes behaved abominably, they very rarely came to the attention of the police or juvenile courts.

Loose antisocial groups on the other hand, comprised of individuals who were deeply disturbed and unhappy with regards to the key institutions of the family, schooling and society at large. Members of this grouping often appeared to be 'bent on a headlong delinquent phase which is not interrupted by court appearance' consequently they will continue to commit offences 'even while on remand' (Scott 1956:11:2). The third delinquent group or "Gangs Proper" with featured characteristics like an identified leader, durable and definite membership, criminal objectives and attachment to a local territory, were much harder to find. The few gangs that were thought to exist did not conform with the image of the gang as portrayed by writers such as Thrasher, which generally paint a picture of 'healthy devilment, adventurousness, pride of leadership' and 'loyal lieutenancy'. Furthermore, a key reason why

it has been almost impossible to locate proper delinquent gangs in Britain is because 'with the ever-decreasing waste sites and vacant lots, the gangs are quickly broken up', nevertheless 'many of those subsequently described under the heading 'unstructured antisocial' groups, might develop into gangs proper if allowed to continue' (Scott 1956:11).

In England the dominant news-media discourse about working class delinquency right up until the late 1990s, as was the case in the academy, centred around the moral and social panics associated with problematic youth subcultural formations. Newspaper discussions about delinquency and violence in Scotland, or more precisely Glasgow, during this period differed considerably from those taking place in the rest of Britain. James Patrick (2013:7) in his 1973 study '*A Glasgow Gang Observed*' reflects on the fact that whilst Gangs are deep rooted in the city's history – from the 1880s right through to the 1920s and 1930s and linked to the city's interminably notorious slums – it was from the mid 1950s that the people of Glasgow, through reports in the press, gradually started to become aware of the growing gang problem in the city. By the mid 1960s the initial trickle of news stories about gangs in Glasgow had exploded into a full scale social and moral panic, with headlines such as '*The Gangs are Back!* As the vandalism, the slashings, the "group disorders" mounted, articles on causation, diagnosis and therapy kept apace' with this growing phenomenon (Patrick, 2013:7). During this period residents on the Easterhouse housing estate attempted to set up vigilante groups against the gangs. However, the city's most senior magistrate warned that any one engaging in any form violent activity would be prosecuted, thus putting to an end all discussions about tenants forming vigilante organisations.

The social panic that was gripping the city was further illustrated when in February 1966 more than 40 shopkeepers and business leaders appealed to their local Member of Parliament for the necessary protection, of themselves and their properties, from the marauding gangs. These demands for greater protection resulted in the creation of an anti youth gang committee



that was headed up by the Lord Provost and the Chief Constable of the City of Glasgow Police. By the early spring of 1966, the national television and radio networks had also begun to report on the problem using phrases such as “a stabbing is no longer news in Glasgow”. The crime statistics for Glasgow, released the same year, revealed that more than 850 individuals ‘had been arrested for carrying an offensive weapon’, also that in excess of ‘1,500 people had been arrested for breach of the peace and just slightly less for disorderly behaviour’ (Patrick, 2013:8). As the year progressed the discussion about gangs and violence in Glasgow by the media, politicians and the police intensified and became even more exaggerated; it is within this atmosphere of social hysteria that Patrick ‘undertook this piece of work’. As a newly qualified teacher working in an Approved school he was invited to join the world of Glasgow’s juvenile gangs by one of his pupils, and thus provided the research context for his 1973 tome which ‘is a descriptive account of a participant observation study of one such gang which I met on 12 occasions between October 1966 and January 1967’ (Patrick, 2013:xi).

Patrick’s study includes a map of Glasgow which is divided into all the gang territories as they existed in 1966, the north-west part of the city was particularly affected as there were more than 20 gangs – the author notes that there were no doubt even more gangs in existence that he was not aware of – ranging in size and importance. Each youth gang possessed an identifiable name usually linked to a clearly marked out territorial attachment, interestingly in the gang that Patrick joined [The Young Team] the boys always referred to themselves as ‘team’ rather than ‘gang’. The gangs of Glasgow also had identifiable leaders who are granted ‘the title of king’ and it is ‘only in this context that the most disturbed personality can come to the fore; through his prowess in explosive acts of violence he is able to capture the leadership of the gang’ (Patrick, 2013:151).

Weapon-enabled serious violence – whether it be through slashing or stabbing with a knife or assault with a razor blade, broken bottle or pint glass – alongside other types of general

delinquency was an everyday and key feature of gang life in Glasgow. For Patrick, the longstanding cumulative and interconnecting problems of slum housing and high rates of: unemployment, youth crime, alcoholism, ill-health and mortality are clearly the root causes of Glasgow's violent gang subcultures. For working class young males born into an intergenerational culture of industrial militancy, hyper-masculine identities, economic hardship and limited life opportunities; the only solution it seems, 'and one hallowed in the traditions of Glasgow slum life, is to respond with violence' (Patrick, 2013:150).

Anne Campbell et al. (1982:77) dismissed Patrick's claims about the problem and existence of gangs in Glasgow, arguing that on closer inspection of his study 'while there were groupings of male youths known by territorial names, there was little if any internal structure and stability of membership'. Malcolm Klein (2001) in the preface to his co-edited collection of research studies on street gangs and problematic youth groups in Europe, '*The Eurogang Paradox*', noted that there was a paucity of research on gangs in Europe. During two sabbatical study leaves in Europe in 1985 and 1991, Klein visited scholars and officials in numerous cities – initially in Stockholm, Zurich, London, Manchester, Berlin, Stuttgart, Frankfurt as well as Kazan and a number of other cities in the Volga region – where youth gangs were reported to be a real social problem and found that they most definitely existed. 'Yet, almost no research depictions of street gangs in these or other cities were available (a notable exception being James Patrick's *A Gang Observed*)' (Klein et al, 2001:xi).

Whichever perspective one takes with regards Patrick's thesis it is clear that the post War research literature on UK gangs is exceptionally sparse. Peter Stelfox's 1998 study examining '*Lower Levels of Organised Crime*' in England and Wales reconfirmed 'that the amount of information available about gangs in the UK is comparatively limited' (Stelfox, 1998: 398), and this situation only began to change at the beginning of the previous decade. I will discuss later on (see chapter 4) exactly what the growing number of UK gang academics had to say (or

not) about issues pertaining to the linkages between race, urban youth cultures and violent crime. Firstly though, the remainder of this chapter will look to review the growing academic interest regarding the contentious issue of youth gangs since the early 2000s.

### **Eurogang Paradox & Manchester's Gangs**

As alluded to briefly above, the growing academic interest in UK gangs can be traced back to the work of the Eurogang Network in the late 1990s, and specifically Klein et al.'s (2001:xii) collection of original research reports from Europe as well as the US. Formally established in 1997, the Network comprised of an international steering committee of scholars who were interested in generating a body of 'gang knowledge and method as applied both to cross-national comparisons and to implications for public policy in Europe'. Much of their work sought to challenge European policy makers' denials about the existence of street gangs because they did not fit the cohesive, hyper violent, highly structured typology of the "real gangs" that are found in America.

The paradox, from which the Network's first book derived its name, 'is that "real gangs" in America do not usually fit the stereotype that led to the denial of gangs in Europe' (Klein et al., 2001:xii). According to the US co-editors Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson, European academic thinking about gangs were, at the time of writing, largely outdated as a consequence of being fixated with the pre-1970s classic texts of amongst others Thrasher, Yablonsky, Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin. However, since these pioneering studies there have been a clutch of modern texts produced during the 1980s and 1990s which have better documented the massive changes in, and proliferation of, American street gangs.

The Eurogang Network accepted that gang definitions are not fit for purpose 'and continue to fail; for each one proposed, exceptions are found' (Klein et al., 2001:218). Very narrow conceptions miss out important elements, whilst more wide ranging conceptions can include rather too much. Street gangs are acknowledged to be informal youth formations that are largely self formed and co-defined in terms of membership as well as by the key stakeholders of the wider community. Nevertheless, according to the Network gang researchers are in general and broad agreement with regards to the following key characteristics. Street gangs are:

- mostly male, but usually with female members
  - mostly minority by race, nationality, or ethnicity, or ethnicity (and almost always comprised of alienated or marginalised youth in any case)
  - mostly youthful (...typically in the adolescent and early years)
  - often territorial and street oriented
  - mostly self recognised as a group, even as a special group
  - mostly oriented toward criminal activity, but with considerable variation in the level of such activity
  - somewhat stable over time, generally from one to many years
- (Klein et al., 2001:218).

These core attributes of the street gang, as identified by the Eurogang Network, are important in that they allow for the conscious exclusion of other organised groups such as prison gangs, rockers, terrorist cells and the wide variety of musical based subcultural groupings. Significantly, the above criteria allows for the exclusion of the great majority of youth cultural formations, peer groups, clubs, and formal teams and such like that – although sometimes

linked to delinquent and anti social activities – do not share the same combination of characteristics found in street gangs.

Dennis Mares (2001) study of '*Working Class Street Gangs in Manchester*', was the only British contribution to Klein et al.'s edited tome, and was based on ethnographic data gathered between September 1997 and January 1998. The author utilised participant observation techniques with several gangs and undertook interviews with gang members and other community stakeholders in Manchester, which was supplemented with newspaper articles, literature and secondary statistical data. However, according to Mares (2001:154) 'unfortunately no statistical data on street gangs were available, as gangs do not yet comprise a distinct category within police statistics'. The study begins with a brief [paragraph] and misinformed historical account about the study of gangs in Britain, where the author talks about the new type of ethnic street gang – up until this point the gangs in question were largely white and working class with distinctly local names – that emerged in England's four largest cities during the 1980s. These street gangs, allegedly based on US gangs like the Bloods and Crips, were heavily involved in the illicit drugs trade which often resulted in extreme violence and turf warfare.

Mares locates two of these newly emergent ethnic street gangs, the Gooch and Doddington, in the 'impoverished' multi ethnic Manchester district of Moss Side. According to him, members of both of these gangs became heavily involved in the illegal drug trade in the 1980s resulting in spiralling violent crime and homicide rates. Surprisingly, the gangs 'are not drug gangs....drug dealing was carried out on an individual basis...the gang as a whole was not an organisation aimed at drug dealing but primarily existed as a social group' (Mares, 2001:155) Each gang allegedly had approximately 90 members, half of whom were serving prison sentences, and 80 per cent were of African Caribbean heritage. However, with regards to this latter point street gangs in Moss Side were largely organised around territory and not ethnicity.

Some of the oldest members were in their early thirties whilst others were aged as young as ten, neither the Gooch or Doddington gang were hierarchically organised and there were no formal or identified leaders. However, the older members or OGs [original gangsters] with a longer history of criminal engagement had more influence on the newer/younger members who tended to be most utilised for the undertaking of the riskiest operations. Gooch and Doddington's stylistic features were heavily influenced by the Black Atlantic street styles popularised by US gangs and the Jamaican posses, and indeed 'the clothing style and musical preferences reinforce their *gangsta* image' (Mares, 2001:156). Consequently, Mares concludes that both of Moss Side's street gangs can be classified as having a neo-traditional structure, because as recently emergent they have not had sufficient time to develop an elaborate structure and subdivision.

The Street gangs in Salford – a district located near Manchester's city centre – were similar to those found in Moss Side, in that they exhibited the same neo-traditional structure and correspondingly high levels of violent criminal activity. The one major difference noted by Mares was that, unlike those found in Moss Side, Salford's street gangs were comprised of white working class youth aged between ten and twenty five. This was most likely attributable to the fact that when some gang members reach their early twenties, they tend to join one of the larger organised criminal organisations that dominate the area. With membership numbering between twenty five to sixty, Salford gangs' criminal activities were centred around car crimes, robberies and the selling of illicit party drugs. As was found to be the case with all of Manchester's gangs, 'the lads in Salford are very territorial ....gangs form on specific streets or in certain neighbourhoods. They also adopt the name of the main street in which they operate' (Mares, 2001:158). Lastly, the Salford gang members dress styles and musical preferences were almost identical to their Black peers in Moss Side in that they wore expensive designer clothing, and were also attracted to the glamourised representations of "gangsta" culture depicted in US rap music lyrics, videos and Hollywood films.

There were many other gangs in existence throughout the rest of the Manchester Metropolitan area that – unlike the neo traditional structures found in Moss Side and Salford – had structures that the author describes as ‘compressed. Often located in impoverished council estates, cliques of youth have formed street gangs that are often short lived and whose members seldom exceed thirty’ (Mares, 2001:159). These gangs are predominantly white, lack any form of organisational structure and most of their criminal endeavours revolve around fighting, petty crime and anti-social behaviour linked to alcohol and drugs misuse. In summary, Mares concluded that the gang problem in Manchester was fairly limited even though there had been a noticeable increase in gang-related violence and delinquency since the 1980s. Overall, he found that the street gangs in Manchester were predominantly white which suggested that the UK experience was ‘slightly different from’ the rest of Europe ‘and is intimately linked to historical class antagonisms’ (Mares, 2001:161).

The escalating problem of gun violence and fatal shootings in South Manchester during the late 1990s and early 2000s, led to the implementation of a three year government funded policing-led strategy aimed at tackling gun and gang related serious violence. Bullock and Tilley’s (2002) *‘Shootings, Gangs and Violent Incidents in Manchester’*, report describes analysis and strategy development for the Targeted Policing Initiative undertaken in South Manchester. This evaluation action study, which utilised a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data also set out to identify the immediate causes of gang related shootings and other serious crime in the city. The research data that informed the Home Office funded report was gleaned from four sources: *Recorded crime statistics* for Greater Manchester Police [GMP] for the period April 1998 to September 2000. *Shootings*, creation of a database containing information on police confirmed shootings in the Greater Manchester Police area between January 1997 and November 2000. *Individuals*, creation of a second database containing information relating to individuals identified by GMP as having had involvement in gangs or in shootings. The database only included young people living in South Manchester

aged 25 and under. *Interviews*, semi structured interviews undertaken with 23 young males identified as being gang-members by GMP and other Justice Sector practitioners.

As a caveat with regards the data upon which the report's findings are based, Bullock and Tilley (2002:8) noted that 'none of the data sources were without difficulties'. Firstly, the shootings database only contained information relating to those incidents 'that came to the attention of the police'. Secondly, all of the data relating to individuals 'was largely a function of police intelligence'. Thirdly, interviewees were selected based upon 'who was readily available....largely because of their involvement in the criminal justice system'. Finally, the authors conceded that both the 'extraction and use' of the data sources 'for aggregate analysis was technically difficult and we were dependent on the accuracy and completeness with which available information was recorded' (Bullock and Tilley, 2002:8). With regards to those longstanding and problematic definitional considerations, throughout this report the term "Gangs" was 'used to refer to relatively enduring identifiable groups of young people who see themselves as members of those groups, and who commit crime as part of that membership' (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 23).

According to the report, and further building upon Mare's earlier findings, there were four major gangs in South Manchester known to the GMP. In addition to Gooch and Doddington, there was also the Pit Bull Crew and Longsight Crew, however, the gang situation was described as being fluid – members joined and left, whilst new groups were formed as older ones disbanded. The Pit Bull and Longsight Crews both emerged as a result of internal shootings/conflicts within the older Gooch and Doddington gangs, and at the time of the report being written the police estimated that approximately 200 young people aged under 25 were connected with the four gangs. Overall the GMP estimated that in 2001, taking into account older associates as well as those younger ones operating at the margins, there were up to



470 individuals engaged in gang activity in the South Manchester area. The other key characteristics of the South Manchester gangs, as identified by police intelligence:

- The gangs were predominantly Black or mixed-race, with nearly 80 per cent of members being of African Caribbean heritage [and British-born].
- Only 11 per cent members were female and played peripheral/supporting roles.
- Known gang members were prolific serial offenders, average of 12 arrests and 2.1 convictions per member.
- Offences included rape, murder, drugs offences, fraud, robbery, burglary, and firearms offences etc...
- Weapons carrying was common-place among members.
- There were longstanding and endemic conflicts between the four gangs.
- Gangs are territorial with identified and demarcated spatial boundaries.
- All gangs comprised of 'a core of main players, together with "ordinary members", "runners" acting on behalf of members, and "associates", who may have links with other gangs 'or provide networks of support' (Bullock and Tilley, 2002:26).

The increasing escalation of gun crime and serious violence in South Manchester during the late 1990s and early 2000s was widely reported in the national news-media – drawing on police statistics and intelligence – as being a gang-related issue that was unique to the city's Moss Side ghetto which housed the majority of its "disadvantaged" and "depraved" Black youth population. The above conclusions were also clearly confirmed in the findings of Mare's (2001) Eurogang ethnographic study as well as Bullock and Tilley's (2002) Home Office report.

However, during this same period there was also an explosion in local and national newspaper headlines and articles concerning the growing menace of gangs throughout the UK's other major urban centres.

### **Surveying the UK Gangs Problem**

Much of the news-media's gaze continued to focus on the endemic criminality – further compounded by the recent introduction and growth of hyper violent American and Jamaican style street gangs and posses – within the nation's Black communities. However, there were an increasing number of news stories about the social havoc being wreaked across the nation by the unprecedented proliferation of many other violent ethnic ["Asian", "Turkish", "Sri Lankan, and "Romanian"] gangs. During this period there were also press reports which described two other worrying new developments; the growing number of under 16s who were gang involved and the phenomena of "Girl gangs". It is within this national context that Bennett and Holloway (2004) set out to examine the full extent of gang membership in England and Wales, by utilising statistical data gleaned from the New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring programme (NEW-ADM). In addition, their study also assessed whether or not there was a direct causal relationship between being a gang member and engaging in problem behaviours such as illicit drug dealing and substance misuse and/or involvement in violent criminal activities.

The research data on gang membership was obtained through NEW-ADM and comprised a three year rolling programme of surveys undertaken in 16 custody suites in England and Wales. All arrestees who were deemed eligible were expected to complete the survey, those who were considered ineligible included vulnerable adults, minors who were aged under 17, and anyone viewed as potentially violent. The research sample included both male and female subjects, with surveys taking the form of a structured questionnaire with the aid of a personal

interviewer. The surveys included questions about drugs usage and supply, lifestyle choices, criminal activities, use of weapons / gun possession, and in 14 of the 16 research sites 2,725 interviewed arrestees were also asked – following a brief explanatory preamble – whether or not they were a member of a gang. In acknowledging some of the limitations of their research study, the authors note that:

- The population of arrestees is not naturally reflective of currently active offenders, they are not always guilty of the offences for which they have been arrested and may be in custody for a wide array of reasons; including being drunk and disorderly, immigration checks, and for bail infringements.
- The NEW-DAM survey did not include young people aged 17 and under, consequently the study is not able to capture any information with regards to gang membership at the younger end of the spectrum.

In mitigation of the above limitations the authors argue that as very little ‘is known about gang members in the United Kingdom’, any new information that can be gleaned ‘on gang members aged 17 years and over....is a useful first step’ (Bennett and Holloway, 2004: 311).

Based on their research sample, Bennett and Holloway estimated that in the period March 2000 to April 2001 there were some 20,000 active gang members among the arrestee population in England and Wales. The authors went on to stress that the above estimates were only based on gang members who were arrested and those aged 18 and over, consequently the total number of gang involved individuals [including juveniles] in England and Wales was more likely to be much higher. Gang members were overwhelmingly white and male aged 25 and under, more significantly the authors concluded that:

Overall, the findings are consistent with the image of street gangs from research in the United States. Gang members tend to be involved in criminal behaviour, generalists in terms of offending patterns, responsible for a notable proportion of all offences, sometimes violent, involved in drug supply offences and have a tendency to carry weapons and guns - and sometimes use them (Bennett and Holloway, 2004: 317).

Clare Sharp et al.'s (2006) Home office report *'Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour'* which examined the findings of the 2004 Offending Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS), specifically looked at the extent to which young people aged 10-19 residing in England and Wales were involved in 'delinquent youth groups' and/or engaged in criminal activities. The 2004 OCJS survey was based on a number of questions developed by the Eurogang Network and was designed to assess levels of offending within the general household population. Throughout the report, the term 'gang' was deliberately avoided due to its problematic and ambiguous nature and in its place the authors referred to 'delinquent youth groups' (DYG), which they define as:

- Young people who spend time in groups of three or more (including themselves).
- The group spend a lot of time in public places.
- The group has existed for three months or more.
- The group has engaged in delinquent or criminal behaviour **together** in the last 12 months.
- The group has at least one structural feature (either a name, an area, a leader, or rules) (Sharpe et al., 2006:3)

Based on the above definitions, the author's estimated that 6 per cent of all 10-19 year olds in England and Wales were involved in a DYG. The level of involvement was the same for boys [at 6 per cent] as it was for girls [also at 6 per cent], however, it was not possible to present any statistical data for BAME involvement due to the small number of respondents. The findings in relation to individual offending by members of DYG indicates that they committed more core offences – robbery, assault, burglary, criminal damage, car crime and drug selling – than non members. Indeed, the OCJS estimates that 6 per cent of 10-19 year olds who are members of a DYG were responsible for roughly one-fifth [21 per cent] of all core crimes committed by this age group. As was acknowledged by the authors, the above findings were unsurprising due to the very nature of the definition of DYG as utilised within the report; nonetheless, they assert that it is still very useful and insightful to examine the differences between the two groups.

An important feature of the DYG definition utilised in Sharpe et al.'s report, relates to the fact that individual members should have committed some criminal offences or delinquent activities together as a group. The group offending/delinquency categories that were most common amongst DYG members: 51 per cent used drugs, 40 per cent threatened or frightened others, 36 per cent engaged in graffiti, 31 per cent broke/damaged or destroyed things, 29 per cent used force or violence on others, 24 per cent stole things. In conclusion the report – which 'provided the first set of nationally representative results' examining the extent of DYG membership in England and Wales amongst 10-19 year olds – indicated that only a minority of young adults were involved in such groups, and 'they engage mostly with low level offending behaviour' (Sharpe et al., 2006:24).

Paul Bradshaw's (2005) study on '*Youth Gangs and Delinquency in Edinburgh*' presented data gleaned from the longitudinal Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, and was based on a research sample of 4,300 young people. Adopting the Eurogang Network's self-definition technique, school children aged 13 at the time were asked to self-nominate; 'if a respondent claimed to be a gang member, this was considered adequate grounds for his or her classification as such' (Bradshaw, 2005:199). Respondents were asked about the number of friends they hung about with, and whether or not they would describe the group of friends they went about with a gang? Interestingly, they were not asked whether the gang was engaged in any types of criminal or delinquent activity; as such the study was not concerned with defining gangs solely in terms of delinquency. The Edinburgh study research team created four increasingly restrictive definitional gang types which they applied to their cohort:

- This first group included non-gang members.
- [Gang type 1] this second group included members of any gang without an identified name, special sign or saying.
- [Gang type 2] this third group included members of any gang that had either an identified name or a special sign or saying.
- [Gang type 3] this fourth group included members of any gang that had both an identified name and a special sign or saying.

Each consecutive gang type, according to Bradshaw, represented a 'a higher degree of gang identification and organisation', as such group 3 'signifies a well-established group whose members readily identify themselves with a specific gang name and sign and symbol' (Bradshaw, 2005:201). The study's findings indicated that one-fifth (19.9 per cent) of all respondents assigned themselves to being in a gang; which referred to any of the three gang categories. More than two-thirds (66.6 per cent) of these self-nominated gang members fell into category gang type 1, just over one-sixth (17.8 per cent) were in Gang type 2, and one-

sixth (16.5 per cent) fell into gang type 3. With regards to gender, 52.6 per cent of girls were members of any of the three gang types, whilst boys represented 47.4 per cent. When the gang definition was funnelled down and became more restrictive it was found that boys made up 61.9 per cent of membership of gang type 3, which were those that were most organised and recognised. Lastly, the study's findings suggested that gang membership affected the respondent's delinquency, but more significantly 'the more organised and easily identified the gang is, the greater its effect on its members' delinquency' (Bradshaw, 2005:210).

Juanjo Medina et al.'s (2013) longitudinal study, *Children and young people in gangs* utilised data from the *Offending Crime and Justice Survey* (OCJS) in order to investigate the conditions and reasons why young adults in England and Wales join, remain and exit gangs. The study adopted the Eurogang definition of street gangs as 'any durable street-oriented youth group whose identity includes involvement in illegal activity', in addition to a variant of it that focused on 'durable, street oriented youth groups that engage in offending behaviour' (Medina et al., 2013:3-4). OCJS data on young people aged 10-16 initially captured during 2003, was then analysed by the research team in 2006 to see how their respondents' behaviour had changed over the previous three years. Before going on to discuss their study's findings and policy implications, the authors noted that household surveys such as the OCJS are only designed to ascertain offending behaviour within the general population. Consequently, this study excludes data from those young people housed within Young Offender Institutions and the juvenile secure estate, and who are deemed to be most at risk from becoming gang involved.

Medina et al.'s longitudinal study found that those young people who are gang involved are more likely to engage criminal activities, anti-social behaviour and substance misuse. However, gang membership does not necessarily lead to offending or other types of

delinquent/problem behaviour and, in fact many of the gang involved young respondents did not report any offending. Most significantly, at least with regards to the emergent and ongoing social panic concerning gangs, the authors concluded that there was no research evidence to substantiate official, news-media and policing claims that the numbers of children and young people joining gangs has increased in recent times. 'We found no evidence that gang members are becoming younger or that the prevalence of joining gangs has changed over time in the seven age cohorts we examined' (Medina et al., 2013: 7).

### **Reluctant Gangsters and Gang Talk**

Whilst Medina et al.'s(2013) findings indicate that emergent moral panics about increasing gangs and gang-related violent crime are misplaced, John Pitts (2008:4) noted that in the time it had taken him to complete his book *'Reluctant Gangsters'*, '39 young people were either shot or stabbed to death on the streets of London in gang-related murders'. Drawing largely on Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and Home Office statistics during (one accounting period) 2007, Pitts noted that despite there being a steady decline in adult and youth crime in Britain during the preceding 15 years, in certain towns and cities there had been a proliferation of gang related youth violence: including armed muggings, homicides, sexual assaults 'and between April and November 1,237 young people were injured in gun and knife attacks'. For him it was clear that the nature of youth crime and youth cultures within certain urban spaces in the UK, and amongst particular groups and communities had changed dramatically. The reason for this was attributed categorically to the explosion of violent youth gangs and the cultures that are associated with them.

Interestingly, *'Reluctant Gangsters'* (2008:6) shies away from attempting to define gangs and instead prefers to describe them, whereas definitions 'by demarcating a field of study' can be inflexible and limiting, 'description can always be augmented by new knowledge and fresh



insights'. Interestingly, the description of the gang he goes on to provide – 'children and young people who see themselves, and are seen by others, as affiliates of a discrete, named, group with a discernible structure and recognised territory' – looks very similar to the official 'street gang' definition currently adopted by the government and the police (see chapter 4). Pitts goes on to further to assert that whilst affiliates do not describe themselves as being in a gang, they use Black-Atlantic British street terms (see Gunter, 2008) like 'crew, family, massive, posse, brerrs, man dem, cousins or boys' (Pitts:2008:6).

Although there have been a small number of survey based studies examining youth gang patterns and membership in the UK during the last two decades (see discussions above), the majority of academic research literature on UK gangs during this period has tended to be of a qualitative nature. Additionally, much of these studies have been carried out within urban and semi-urban neighbourhood settings – for example in Manchester (Aldridge and Medina, 2008), South Wales (Maher, 2009), Glasgow (Deuchar, 2009; Fraser, 2013) and London (Densley, 2013; Harding, 2014; Windle and Briggs, 2015) – and have featured a relatively small sample of research respondents. In fairness, apart from John Pitts' *'Reluctant Gangsters'* (which I discuss in more detail in chapters 4 and 5), the majority of these locally situated case studies do not necessarily make claims beyond their local research site; that there is a national gangs crisis or that the nature of youth cultures in urban Britain has changed irrevocably, to become principally characterised by hyper violent street crime.

Nevertheless, many of these gang studies have tended to bypass the vast literature and array of perspectives that characterise the multi disciplinary area of contemporary youth studies, and instead have been content to view the issue of urban youth violence solely through a criminological and Community Safety lens. In comparison to the recent London based gang

studies, Ross Deuchar's '*Gangs, Marginalised Youth and Social Capital*' takes a more holistic approach with its examination into the lives of young adults growing up in Glasgow 'who have become disenfranchised by educational failure, unemployment and poverty'. By taking into account 'both the positive and negative roles that youth gatherings and gangs can play in young people's lives', the book 'reflects upon the relationship between gang culture and building social capital' and 'aims to empower those who work with' disadvantaged youth (Deuchar, 2009:xi). Although the author is concerned about the increasing demonization of young people and their behaviour which is closely linked to neo-liberal welfarism and the 'punitive turn', he quickly goes on to assert that the UK and the rest of the world is facing a growing gang problem.

But just like his fellow academic gang apologists, the research evidence that Deuchar provides to justify his claims – that in cities across the globe gang culture is on the rise and that there is an 'increasing tendency for younger members to join gangs and become involved in more serious crime' (Deuchar, 2009:17) – is extremely threadbare and partial to say the least. For his own study, the author undertook semi-structured interviews with 50 young people [in addition to interviewing a number of adult community stakeholders] drawn from across four deprived geographical locations. Significantly, the book fails to provide any kind of gang definition or typology, however, a summary of the 'important findings' from the study which is included at the end of chapter four notes: 'The Glasgow Gangs described by the young people could be classified as street gangs (Klein, 2001)', meanwhile their activity seemingly matched 'Thrasher's (1927) classic definition of conflict associated with attachment to local territories'. Although the majority of gang members tended to be involved with petty crimes 'such as under-age drinking, drug use and recreational violence', they did occasionally engage in more serious kinds of criminal activity which included 'violent attacks which were sometimes racially driven'. Lastly, according to Deuchar, gang members were predominantly male and they

'drifted into gangs' for many different reasons, 'including the search for power, excitement and status...; compensating for educational failure, unemployment or dysfunctional family life...; to express narrowly defined masculinity...; and to continue a family tradition of gang membership (Deuchar, 2009: 53-54).

### *Violent Street Gangs*

Simon Harding's book '*The Street Casino: Survival in violent street gangs*' is also surmised on the belief that violent street gangs are a pervasive and growing problem that particularly blights the most distressed and disadvantaged urban communities. According to the author, rather than deny the daily realities of this brutal and often fatal violence – which engenders fear and anxiety amongst those caught up in gang life – 'we owe the young people involved a moral and social responsibility to understand this world, to explore this social field...' In order to provide fresh insights and a new perspective on UK gangs which 'illuminates the variety of interrelationships, networks and behavioural dynamics crucial to understanding the evident complexities of UK gangs', this ethnographic study examines street gangs in South London and utilises Bourdieu's social field analysis method (Harding, 2014:14/24). Significantly and conveniently, '*The Street Casino*' deliberately sidesteps the many thorny and contested discussions about definitions and typologies (see chapter 1) so as to refocus on other areas. The study uses Miller's (1992) street gang definition:

.....a self-formed association of peers, united by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership and internal organisation, who act collectively or as individuals to achieve specific purposes, including the conduct of illegal activity and control of a particular territory, facility, or enterprise' (cited in Harding, 2014:17).

In addition to the participant observation method which included 60 site visits, the author also carried out qualitative interviews with 7 local residents, 10 police officers who worked with gangs, 15 justice sector practitioners who worked with gang affiliated young people, and 24 gang affiliated and/or at-risk youth. [As an aside it would be interesting to know whether the research participants, worked to and/or agreed with this catchall definition].

Harding's key theory and main findings are that daily life in the violent street gang [or the gang social field] is comparable to a casino game: the young people – whether they are associates, affiliates or members – are the 'players' in the 'Game' who are on the never ending quest for street capital represented by power, money and the maintaining/enhancement of their reputations. In this volatile and high risk world street capital equates to the chips on a roulette table that can be lost, won or traded. This is a casino that never closes and where every day there are a different group of winners and losers, but ultimately the House will always win!

The fallout from all of this is that within the social field of SW9 [the area of South London where the research was undertaken] the utilisation of excessive violence is the primary means by which actors seek to gain a reputation and obtain street capital 'and it is a feature of all three repertoires expressive, instrumental and sanction'. Recent developments in the 'social field mean that firearms are now used to support these strategies across all three repertoires' and this in turn helps to 'explain the increase in violence in SW9' which has spilled over into the wider community. Within the neighbourhoods that constitute SW9 'gangs are no longer the aberrant 'other'. For many young people gang affiliation is a natural and logical progression' and their every day lived experiences whether at school, on the streets or in the home 'means that violence is wholly normalised, expected and required in the social field' (Harding, 20014:231).

*'How Gangs Work: An Ethnography of Gang Violence'* by James Denseley aims to challenge 'popular misconceptions about gangs – as amorphous collectives of hoodies and hoodlums, "unhappy, unloved, and out of control", perpetrating wanton acts of crime and violence' – in order to demonstrate that by and large gang members are 'rational agents who optimize under the constraints of their harsh life conditions'. Correspondingly, gangs 'are rational organizations that evolve to punish fraud and fault but reward industry and ingenuity' (Denseley, 2013: 3). Unlike the London gang studies of Pitts (2008) and Harding (2014), Denseley does engage with the ongoing debates and disagreements about definitions, typologies and behaviours before himself departing the 'definition merry-go-round' to declare his gang definition of choice:

First, they are all self-formed associations of peers that have adopted a common name and other discernible 'conventional' or 'symbolic' signals of membership (see Gambetta, 2009b, p. xix). Second, they are comprised of individuals who recognize themselves (and are recognized by others) as being 'members' of a 'gang' who.....engage in...have engaged in...criminal activity. Third.....their business remains confined within the group—gangs are, in Martín Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991, p. 28) words, 'quasi-private' and 'quasi-secretive' organizations. Fourth, disputes within the group cannot be settled by an external 'third party' as established by the rule of law (Denseley, 2013: 5-6).

*'How Gangs Work'* is primarily based on data derived from qualitative interviews with self-nominated 'members' (n=52) and 'associates' of 12 gangs, aged 13 to 34, drawn from six of the most deprived and gang-affected boroughs in London. In addition, the author also carried

out interviews with: 27 young people aged 16 to 24 who lived in the same geographical locations but who were not gang affiliated, the parents/siblings of gang members (n=15); 87 adult practitioners from the police service, CPS, courts, probation working within the areas of law enforcement, health, education, social services and the voluntary and community sector. Densley's research differs from that of many other UK gang studies in that it centres around the experiences of informants who 'claim the identity as a gang member for themselves rather than having it placed on them by others. They described themselves as committed to their gangs'. By way of contrast, gang associates 'neither recognized themselves nor were recognized by others as bona fide gang members, yet they offended with gang members and were associated with them by' the police, justice sector professionals, 'or community information' (Denseley, 2013: 9-10).

According to Denseley to understand why young people join gangs we firstly need to acknowledge the contexts and circumstances in which they join. With regard to this particular study [where nearly 80 per cent of the research subjects were Black males] there were longstanding problems that the Black community faced pertaining to the 'difficult' schools which many of the interviewees attended alongside the lack of supervision they received, as result of being lone-parented or because both parents were busy working. According to the author, the above set of circumstances means that the pervasive allure of the gang within the neighbourhood setting becomes irresistible to many young people: gang members exhibit high aspirations to be economically successful and share with their non-gang peers the 'material expectations encouraged within advanced capitalism. Overt differences in life chances have' – as result of racism and structural inequality – 'however, translated into perceptions of injustice that in turn affect the decisions they make about their life strategies'. ...Gang membership is a choice' but this is clearly 'a choice that would have much less resonance with' youth living in gang-affected neighbourhoods 'if they saw more evidence that

commitment to non-subterranean values among their families and peers actually led to the achievement of valued goals' (Densley, 2013: 40).

Of course there are serious risks and dangers associated with being a gang member; specifically the normalisation of serious violence and its utilisation as a sanction for the violation of gang norms, minor and mid-level rule breaking or failing to follow orders of an 'elder'. If a member accrues too many mid-level infractions or is deemed a traitor then they run the risk of being kidnapped and brutally punished or 'tortured'. Although economic violations such as the failure to pay debts will tend to lead to economic sanctions they also can be accompanied by physical violence including non fatal stabbings, slashings and shootings. Generally violence was used by the elders to regulate the behaviours of young gang members, additionally the informants disclosed of incidents where 'sexual violence was used as a means to address the supposed transgressions of women' Densley, 2013: 96).

### *Violence Against Women and Girls*

Juanjo Medina et al.'s (2012) '*Hidden Behind the Gunfire: Young Women's Experiences of Gang-Related Violence*', based on data from a 3 year ethnographic study of youth gangs in an English city, is one of the few research articles that attempts to explore the impact of gang culture on the lives of young women and the different ways in which it shapes their experiences of violence and victimization. According to the authors, the young women were perceived by the male members as playing a secondary role within the majority of gangs that were studied. The young women were often involved in the criminal activities of the gang: 'stashing money, drugs, or guns'; providing alibis; 'selling stolen goods; using their homes as "safe

houses”.....setting up “honey-traps” against rival gang members; and cover/drivers to shift drugs’ between cities. Yet, whilst they are clearly involved in central gang activities ‘women were rarely talked about as “proper” members by gang-involved young men and by the police and other state agencies’.

Medina et al. ‘encountered gang-related sexual and intimate partner violence, for example, sexual assault/rapes reported by young women, allegedly committed by young men involved in their gang’. However, the risk of violence was not restricted to those females with an active role as female relatives and the girlfriends of gang members ran the risk of physical violence from rival gangs either as ‘witnesses, or victims of threats and assaults’ (Medina et al., 2012: 655). According to the author’s this focus on young women is long overdue because the ‘problem of gang violence in England is [still] primarily discussed by academics, practitioners, and policy makers as a problem of young men’s violence against other young men’ (Medina et al., 2012:654). An exception to the above statement is Race On The Agenda’s (ROTA) *‘Female Voices In Violence Project’* (Firmin, 2010) which is one of the first UK studies to examine the impact of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls.

Utilising a team of volunteer researchers ROTA interviewed 352 women and girls from across London and from a wide range of backgrounds and age groups. Although the Female Voice In Violence (FVV) project did include one-to-one interviews, the majority of fieldwork involved focus group interviews and discussions. Of those interviewed 57 per cent self-identified as being associated with, or affected by gangs and serious youth violence due to their relationship to a gang member: as a mother, sister, link/sexual partner, friend, aunty/other female relative, or associate. Forty-three per cent of those interviewed stated that they were not affected by gang-related youth violence, and had no association to gangs.



The 5 key findings identified in the FVV project report were that: Firstly, there is a 'negligible amount of intelligence on the numbers of women and girls affected by gang violence', either as mothers, sisters, links/sexual partners, or as female gang associates/members. Secondly, 'sexual violence and exploitation are significant weapons used against females' who are associated or involved in gangs. 'Rape has become a weapon of choice. Thirdly, women and girls who are gang affiliated 'rarely disclose any victimisation they experience due to fears over reprisals', in addition to the 'belief that their criminal association means that they are not privy to the protection of the state'. Fourthly, many of the girls who carry guns and drugs for their boyfriends reside outside of gang affected areas and they also 'may attend grammar or private all-girls schools'. However, these young women 'rarely receive interventions and struggle to identify routes of support'. Lastly, the FVV project found that gang associated young women who offend 'are being processed through systems such as youth justice, or alternative education which are designed to work with boys', and any interventions that they are able to access will tend to take place 'in environments dominated by boys. This has a severe impact on their ability to address their offending behaviour and reduce their victimisation' (Firmin, 2010:7-8).

Informed by ROTA's FVV project and subsequent reports (Firmin, 2010 & 2011), the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) undertook an Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. In 2013 the OCC in partnership with the University of Bedford published "*It's wrong... but you get used to it*" which was a report on the findings of the Inquiry's commissioned research study examining gang related sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young adults in England (Beckett et al., 2013). The 2 year study qualitative study involved one-to-one and group interviews with 188 young people [females and males aged 13 to 28, who were from a variety of backgrounds] and 76 professionals drawn from 6 geographical locations across England. Eighty seven per cent [131] of the young adults

interviewed had direct connections with gangs and of these: 40 per cent reported that they had directly witnessed instances of gang-associated violence and exploitation, whilst 23 per cent of females and 4 per cent of males self-identified themselves of gang-related sexual violence and exploitation.

As stated in to the OCC's report, there were three types of sexual violence or exploitation that specifically impacted upon young women and were also identified as unique to the gang environment: 1. 'Sexually assaulting, or having a sexual relationship with, a 'female who has direct connections with a rival gang or 'gang-involved young man in order to "disrespect" or provoke that young man or gang'; 2. The "honey trap" scenario where a young woman's sexuality is used to "set up" males in rival gangs; 3. 'Sexual activity or sexual assault as a means of initiation into the gang' (Beckett et al., 2013: 27). Lastly, as part of their findings the authors maintain that gang-related sexual violence and exploitation 'does not occur in a vacuum – it is influenced both by the wider gang environment and wider patterns of sexual violence and exploitation in society' (Becket, 2013: 6).

### *Critiquing Gang Talk*

During the last twenty years or so there have been a significant number of ethnographic studies of marginalised and /or offending young people growing up in some of Britain's most deprived urban areas, that neither locate youth gangs (Alexander, 2000; Sanders, 2005; ) or describe it as being an issue in their research findings (Back, 1996, Craine, 1997; Nayak, 2003; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Gunter, 2010; Brookman et al., 2011; Parkes and Conolly, 2013). It is important to note also that there are a number of critical criminologists who have taken issue with the police-media driven gang crisis thesis as presented by academics such

as John Pitts. In his article entitled '*Perpetual novelty*' Geoffrey Pearson reminds us that contemporary social panics centred upon shootings, stabbings, gangs, street crime and general youth delinquency 'are better understood as persistent, if somewhat intermittent, features of the social landscape, and in this respect we suffer from a profound historical amnesia' (Pearson, 2011:20).

There has also been criticism levelled at, on the one hand, the exaggerated newspaper reports about the perceived new social phenomena and problem of girl gangs and associated increase in female violence and criminality. While and on the other hand, these critics have also noted the way in which qualitative UK gang studies have been male-centred with young women largely ignored or else portrayed either as auxiliary members or victimised sexual appendages (see earlier discussions, also Batchelor, 2009 & 2011; Young, 2009). Although this issue will be explored in more detail later on (see chapter 4), other academics have also taken issue with the media-fuelled gangs crisis, and in particular highlighted the implications for already over policed and stigmatised / marginalised BAME populations (Alexander, 2008; Aldridge et al., 2008; Smithson et al., 2013; Joseph and Gunter, 2011). In particular, Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young have been two of the most consistently outspoken critics of the media fuelled moral panics concerning the feral and violent street gangs allegedly besieging Britain's major urban centres. In their 2004 article '*Getting Real About Gangs*', the authors noted that the UK had become afflicted by 'gang fever' following the fatal shootings of two young women in Birmingham in 2003. Moreover, as far as the nation's gang talkers – such as the tabloid press and documentary film producers – are concerned, the urban street gang has successfully replaced the mugger as the 'folk-devil *par excellence*' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004).

For Hallsworth and Young, the exaggerated and sensationalised depictions of, as well the disproportionate reactions to, this perceived new national menace fail to place the real problems of urban violence into perspective. One of the key reasons why it has been difficult to do so, is because of the myriad of definitional problems and ambiguities inherent in the term “gang”. As such when is a group of young people hanging together on the streets not a gang? Does it mainly apply when they are Black or when they are poor? Also, why limit the notion of gangs just to young people, surely the criminal activities of international corporations like Enron are gang like? In their paper ‘*Gang talk and gang talkers*’, the authors similarly discuss the partial research evidence about, and unproven empirical case for, the existence of gangs in the UK context (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). Consequently, the ‘understandings people bring to bear when the gang menace is evoked has, by default, been saturated with references acquired from the American context’ (Hallsworth and Young, 2004:12). However, urban street life as it is played out in the Black and Hispanic ghettos of the US is completely different from what goes on in the UK.

More poignantly, Hallsworth and Young argue that groups of youth hanging together in urban spaces should not automatically be linked to criminal activity and anti social behaviour. Indeed, the ‘attention the gang receives’ is more of a reflection of ‘the sensational and (often) inaccurate coverage produced by the mass media than it does the objective reality of the street’ (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:184). The numerous journalistic devices utilised by the print and broadcast media when doing their gang talk is central to the construction of the gang myth. Accordingly, the first tactic deployed entails applying the label of the gang ‘more or less permissively and uncritically to any group that appears to occasion social disquiet’. Unsurprisingly, this ‘goes hand in hand with a tendency to report that the gang is the problem even when the evidence linking it is very tenuous’. Then for added ‘good measure, having terrified the wider population, urgent strategies and policies are demanded of “experts” to

suppress the gang which law and order politicians seem' more than happy to oblige with (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:182-183).

It is not only the news industry that is responsible for the creation of the gang myth, academic gang talkers, rather than challenging the misrepresentations of the media's gaze, have preferred to 'confirm it in their fixation and their elected method of research' (Ibid:185).

For Clare Alexander also, the gang menace has been so distorted, over-reported and academically consolidated that it has 'become, in fact, a contemporary urban legend'. Nonetheless, this does not 'make it either right or helpful in understanding what is actually going on, or how the problems of youth violence might be addressed' (Alexander, 2008:7). According to Hallsworth and Young, whilst it is clear that some young people are involved in group-based offending and violence, much of this delinquency and anti-social behaviour stems – not from the formation of inherently pathological gangs – from the ecology of the world's that many young males inhabit.

The boredom and mundanity of daily life for disadvantaged urban youth entrapped on miserable and decaying crime-ridden housing estates; 'motivated like most to identify with a particular group (peers, the estate, ethnic group, school) the conditions are established both for group loyalty and conflict' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004:12). In response to limited socio-economic and spatial circumstances, and to avoid boredom, some young people reconstruct 'their street worlds in dramatic ways: to be in a world that is rich in excitement and danger' (Ibid.). For Hallsworth, a solution to the problem of urban youth violence lies in tackling the socio-economic and spatial problems that help create a street ecology of disorganization and volatility. The way forward then, rather than deploying ever more draconian and discriminatory gang suppression policies and practice, can only be by 'radicalizing and politicizing the often deeply alienated and marginalized young people who live amongst it' (Hallsworth, 2011:195).

## Conclusion

Although recently there has been a discernible shift in thinking on UK gangs by policy-makers and a small [but increasing] number of academics, it is still the case that the overwhelming majority of historical and contemporary studies concerning young people – whether policy led, practice oriented or purely academic – in Britain has been about either their ‘cultures,’ or ‘transitions’. Youth cultural perspectives have tended to focus upon identities, lifestyles, fashions, neotribes and subcultures; youth transitions perspectives, on the other hand, are largely preoccupied with examining patterns of economic socialisation, specifically the relationship between education and the labour market.

During much of the post-War period the problems associated with delinquent working class subcultures dominated the research agendas of scholars interested in the UK youth question. However, according to the wealth of literature that was generated by this academic interest there was virtually no evidence to suggest that structured youth gangs existed on British soil. This state of affairs continued right on into the 1980s with Anne Campbell et al. – who also dismissed James Patrick’s ([1973] 2013) claims about gangs in Glasgow – asserting that whereas the United States has gangs Great Britain has youth subcultures (Campbell et al., 1982). Notwithstanding the intervention of Malcolm Klein et al.’s Eurogang Network since the late 1990s or more specifically the recent claims by gang scholars such as John Pitts, Ross Deuchar and Simon Harding. There is still very little [or convincing enough] research evidence to suggest that ‘violent youth gangs and the culture they ferment’ (Pitts, 2008:4) have proliferated throughout the many decaying and distressed urban centres of Great Britain.